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I left my heart in Edinburgh Playhouse . . .



The star quality is immediately apparent. Elton John: Pic, Philip Zara.

Elton John
EDINBURGH PLAYHOUSE

EDINBURGH is a good city. Not a great one, but a good one. It would be even better if the town planners would only leave it alone. Their greatest monstrosity, the St. James Centre, looks down over the Playhouse, a now disused cinema with fine accoustics and a 3,000 seating capacity. The city fathers could have bought it for half the £1.2 million they spent on knocking down some fine old buildings and abandoning the resultant hole in the ground which was to have been the scene of John Reid's admirable Festival of Popular Music, the complement to the city's own annual festival. A worthy venture this, which has not had the attention it merits. Take a bow, Mr. Reid.

Elton John's concert was to have been the crowning glory of this festival. And was it? Let's take a peep.

The show has been opened by local comic Bill ("You've made me feel like a 16-year-old! So if there's one ready . . .") Barclay, who does in fact have some new jokes. And now, what have we here? On stage — excuse my pointing — a £1,400 white carpet for the occasion. New siiver-grey curtains too.

Across the stage are — wait for it — a grandfather clock, an early French bronze statue of an archer, a Chinese porcelain cabinet, a Chinese chair of cherry wood engulfed in flowers and a pair of wolfhound statuettes. We are spared the partridge and the pear tree.

Nothing too ostentatious, you understand.

And in the middle, one grand piano. Elton John goes solo tonight. No band, no nothing — just him. And here comes our man now — up through the floor, playing the cinema organ. Nothing like putting your head on the chopping block in front of the T.V. cameras!

Disaster or Triumph? Does he carry it off? Of course he does! Apparently a bag of nerves before the show, the master showman takes it away with no bother. From the opening notes of "Skyline Pigeon", you just know that everything is gonna be All Right tonight. The man is a star. Yes, Virginia, they do still exist, and this man is one. Take a good look now, because this is going to be his last appearance for 18 months, although I understand we'll have an album or six to keep us going.

In the following two hours, our hero gives us 18 songs and three encores, all of which are received as if there's no tomorrow. The audience are completely in his hands. A roar greets the opening notes of each number and bedlam ensues at its finish, but by God, you could hear the proverbial pin drop during the performance as they sit in rapt attention.

What we are witnessing is the tribute to the Star as Human. The key to Elton's unique appeal and popularity is his very evident humanness: the nerves, the evident pleasure he gets from his applause, the refusal to play the big head — no distance separates him from his audience. Nice to see the Good Guy on top for once.

He's one of them and they're with him all the way.

With no band to stand in, Elton stands or falls on his own merits tonight. And stand he does, like a giant. He holds the crowd by sheer force of personality. There's plenty of chat and antics but none of it detracts from his huge talent which is all the more obvious tonight for its being thrust out there on its own.

The material is delivered with such verve and skill that it's simply stunning at times. What with superstar status and albums delivered by the ton, one tends to lose sight of the real thing underneath it all, and take it all for granted. What a great way to be reminded!

If you should remain sceptical, I present as proof positive his renderin of "Saturday Night's All Right" etc. on which the band simply *were not missed*. "Saturday Night" on solo piano? you persist. Now look, this is Elton John, not Liberace! He's got a good line in stage patter too, disarming all and sundry with a gentle line in self mockery. He welcomes his audience not to *In Concert* but to *Going For A Song*! He teases the STV cameramen too — "Are we back on the air again? Sod 'em if we're not . . ." and into the next number.

The songs? Well, you know them all. Material from "Empty Sky" right up to date. He gave a preview of two songs, both ballads, from the new double set "Blue Moves". There was "Tonight" with its long piano intro, and then "Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word" which has No. 1 written all over it.

If the rest of the set is half as good as that, I for one will be well pleased. the rest of the material includes the favourites, "Daniel", "Rocket Man", "Candle In The Wind" and of course "Your Song", and some songs that don't usually get an airing — "The Greatest Discovery", "Sweet Painted Lady" . . . and I gotta say how fine it was to hear Lesley Duncan's "Love Song" again.

"Bennie And The Jets" went down a storm to massed handclapping, and everyone sang along to "Don't Go Breaking My Heart".

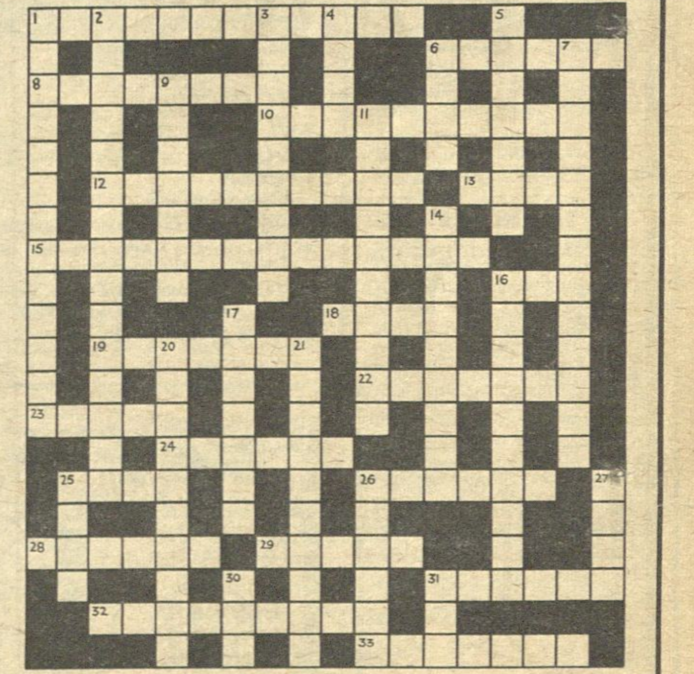
The material was well varied — "You can only sing them so many down songs before they nod off!"

Nod off? No chance. The man himself ends up standing on the piano, wearing a tartan headband, leading an ecstatic audience through chorus after chorus of "Saturday, Saturday . . ." What more do you want — blood?

In short, you should have been there. All those ready to write off British rock and Elton John in particular are in for a severe disappointment and a long wait.

Ian Cranna

NME EXPRESS WORD



ACROSS
1 Sometime guitarist for Canned Heat, pipped by R. Wood as replacement Stone (6,6)
6 The band that *doesn't* give the biological wash! (5,1)
8 L.A. jailbait, courtesy Kim Fowley
10 The Acid Queen (4,6)
12 See 14
13 Eddie's henchmen
15 Both born in Nashville, Tennessee, gave name to their band (6,8)
16 & 28 One of his singles hits was 1970 version of Box Tops' "The Letter"
18 "Tons Of Sobs" was their debut album
19 The big-voiced Big O
22 See below
23 & 22 Former pirate, where he made his name in show with Dave Cash
24 Patti Smith label
25 With Cynthia Weil, half one of '60s most successful songwriting partnerships
26 One half of Neil Diamond's first fruity U.S. hit
28 See 16 across
29 D. Gates & Co.
31 Unattached record
32 Rude vicar (anag. 6,3)
33 Adds vocal support on "Desire"

DOWN
1 Yet another ex-Miles sidekick, making good on the jazz-funk circuit
2 Spirit axeman in lustful state — and special friend of Max's (5,10)
3 Bedsit singer / songwriter (2,7)
4 Ex of The Belmonts
5 Ritchie's crock of . . . gold
6 Joni elpee
7 & 25 Down, Among the biggest-selling albums of the '70s (4,4,2,3,4)
9 Firstly of the Strawbs
11 Oldest living punk in rock (4,6)
14 &12 Led by two brothers, their rhythm section is now with Don Harrison Band
16 The Ali of soul (5,5)
17 Afro rhythm aces
20 Extended player (5,5)
21 Fearsome reggae elpee (5,5)
25 See 7
26 1972 No 1 for G. O'Sullivan
27 One half of Stax soul duo
30 The carnivorous axeman
31 Other half of Stax soul duo

LAST WEEK'S ANSWERS

ACROSS: 1 Flo And Eddie; 7 Eric Idle; 8 Purple; 10 Wilko Johnson; 11 Billy (Paul); 13 Eagles; 16 Marc (Bolan); 17 Henry; 18 (Neil) Sedaka; 20 Max; 21 Joan Baez; 23 Paul; 25 Carly (Simon); 26 Drifters; 27 Nona (Hendryx); 28 "Hey Joe"; 29 Leo Sayer; 30 Kool (& The Gang). **DOWN:** 1 Fleetwood Mac; 2 Ohio Players; 3 Neil Young; 4 Deep; 5 Impressions; 6 Bolan; 9 Bowie; 12 "Layla", 14 Ace; 15 "Shaved Fish", 19 Amboy Dukes; 20 MCA; 21 Jackson (Five); 22 Airplane; 23 Pete York; 24 Lesley (Gore).